**Chapter 5**

Ardam shrugged and followed Johanson into the grass. Behind him he felt the others start out. A quick glance gave him their marching order, Neema, the doctor and PronDissy. It was a good order he thought, Johanson in front, Neema and the doctor in the middle and Pron bringing up the rear. The air was silent and still, the other inhabitants less so. The various noises of insects and birds made a constant background curtain. The insects were pretty much everywhere, although he wouldn’t deem then intrusive. The birds were mainly of the medium variety, nothing large enough to say predator, but that’s what they were, constantly dropping down to silence a member of the insect chorus. He still saw no sign of animal life, although a short distance into the field he got the impression of many small reptiles moving through the grass. It wasn’t something he was conscience of, like a difference in sound, but more like the voice of experience making observations from off stage. This world was teaming with life, just apparently minus animals, at least ones large enough to carve out changes in the environment.

It was Johanson who actually stumbled on the first reptile. He was bitten by it.

“Ouch,” yelped Johanson as he jumped backwards, lost his balance and fell into Ardam who raised a quick hand to prevent the man from falling.

“Problem?” asked Ardam.

“Something bit me – or tried too.” Johanson, having regained his balance was stooped, peering into the grass looking for his assailant.

Ardam raised a hand to stop the doctor who was attempting to get to Johanson. “Whoa doctor. What do you mean tried to bite you?”

“There it is, a snake, not a very big one.” The man moved forward slowly, his hands reaching towards the ground.

“Stop,” said Ardam, his voice slightly raised in volume. “Let’s not give it a second chance just yet.” He moved to the side and closer to get a look. As snakes went it wasn’t a very impressive one in size. It was about a meter in length, dark brown in color and the cross section of a small human forearm. It had the general appearance of snakes he had known on many worlds. It would seem that form followed function in the case of reptiles that moved without the benefit of limbs. It didn’t look dangerous but Ardam knew not to be fooled by that. Snakes of any size could be dangerous, although, that often wasn’t the case. In most cases they avoided humans - unless stepped on of course.

“You said it attempted to bite you. What does that mean?”

Johanson’s fingers smoothed the material of his jump suit where it extended over the top of his midcalf boot. “It didn’t break the material. Pinched like hell, it gave it a good try.”

“So, it didn’t break the skin?” asked the doctor, a medical device of some type already in her right hand.

“No, it just startled me.”

“Sorry doctor, although I admire your readiness. Johanson, take a picture and find a way around it.”

Neema asked, “take a picture. Is that really necessary? This isn’t a survey mission.”

“As far as I’m concerned it is and we’ll treat it as such. Surprise is the fastest way to dead, and the more we learn about this world the less the chance of surprise.” Ardam gave her a look that said he was serious. She offered no response.

Now that they knew they were there the group spotted more of the slithering residents of the field. It became evident that they were no threat to humans when they moved out of the way quickly. Evidently the one Johanson had stepped on wasn’t as observant as his fellows.

The reptile did accomplish one thing, slow their pace. It increased the time to reach the base of the hills by an hour over Ardam’s initial estimate. It was well past midday when the ground began to curve upwards at an ever-increasing angle. Ardam called a halt at a level area just before the first of the very thick and very tall trees.

“Let’s stop here. This is as good a spot as any to make camp, the grounds level and the grass isn’t too tall. We can mash it down pretty easy and form a circle for the tents.”

Neema looked around and the grassy area and compared it to the clear of undergrowth forest ahead. “Why not just us the clear ground?”

It was PronDissy who answered. “Because keeping track of things on the ground is one thing without having to worry about who might drop in.”

Ardam looked around, “I don’t think we have to worry about anything large bothering us on the ground. I still haven’t seen any signs of animal life, large, small or in the middle. A single drop cloth as a base for our tents should be protection from crawlies in the ground. As far as anything else, we’ll put a protector ring around the ground sheet. That should stop the merely curious.”

Johanson nodded and begin pulling gear from his backpack without being told. As a trainee he was the official ships gopher handling all things that no one else wanted to do, and that was alright with him. It gave him a chance to learn and experience things. Plus, he liked to feel useful.

Ardam noticed the trainee starting to setup the camp and grinned his approval. It made sense anyway, as low man on the totem pole Johanson had been carrying the ground sheet, protection ring and five individual tent/sleep bags. Ardam was carrying a backup set as always, it was something he did just to be safe, and its not like the ultra-low weight gear was really a burden. He always felt better when he knew that he had a backup. Besides, there was always the chance that the team could have to separate into two groups in which case having a second set of camping gear could be helpful.

“Good work Tim,” he said. “I see that you’ve got the eagers.”

“Eagers,” said Neema, a question on her face.

“That’s what you call it when someone starts something without being asked or told,” said PronDissy. “It’s a survey thing.”

“You were in the service,” the girl asked.

“She was,” said Ardam, “although she won’t admit it. I looked it up.”

“You don’t have the rank to pull up somebodies record like that.”

He laughed, “no, but Trent knows people who do.”

“Figures,” said PronDissy. “That man knows way too many people and gets them to do way too many things they shouldn’t.”

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The subject of PronDissy’s comment was at the moment in a dispute with Jonteel Cutler.

Jonteel said, “the answer is still no Trent. There is no reason to send the other shuttle down to look for the missile site. We don’t have the manpower and I’m not going risk a second shuttle.”

Trent, intent on heading down to surface after in depth sensor scans had turned up nothing, was standing his ground. “Look, that still leaves the cargo shuttle as a backup. I’m volunteering to go and it’s really just a one-man mission anyway. If that launcher has missiles left, it’s better for me to find out going down rather than them coming back up.”

“I’ll grant you that. They’ll be in boost phase when they launch and a missile attack then would be a whole lot harder to dodge. But look at it this way. If that launcher has missiles left, it wouldn’t make sense to get the other heavy shuttle banged up. I don’t want to have to come after the whole lot of you in the cargo bus, it’s slow, lightly hulled and flies like a rock.”

Trent thought about continuing the argument but decided against it. He really didn’t disagree with the engineer. Frustration at having no discernable course of action had always been a problem for him.

“Fine, you’re probably right, but as soon as we’re back into the daylight band I’m going to keep looking. We could go to a lower orbit, that might help.”

The third member of their bridge group chimed in, “I like that idea, lower orbit, let’s do it.”

Jonteel starred at her, “not you too. With the gear we’ve aboard this boat it wouldn’t make a difference.”

“I don’t care about that,” said Cwen. But it might make us harder to find on a sensor scan form whatever ship just sent a recognize code to that beacon.”

Jonteel’s eyes narrowed. “What ship, and you might have led with that.”

“Don’t know what ship. I don’t even know for sure that it is a ship. Something sent something from out-system that caused a response from the beacon.”

Trent slid into the control seat to Jonteel’s left. “Sounds like a ship to me. Did the ship get a recording on the transmission?”

Jonteel, his hands busy on the console, spoke almost as quick as his fingers were moving. “It was just a burst transmission, and no, we didn’t get a good copy of it, our antennae are all facing down.”

Trent, busy at his own portion of the console, turned his attention to the other two, mainly Cwen. “Stop.”

“What?”

“You were about to go active on the sensors, don’t.”

Cwen, her hand hovering over a particular spot, opened her mouth to say something else. She closed her mouth and moved her hand back. “Got it, don’t advertise. We’re not supposed to be here.”

Jonteel nodded agreement but added, “neither should anyone else. It would be strange if Survey choose this particular time to examine this system, and how would they know the beacon response code.”

“They wouldn’t,” said Trent, “there’s something going on here that we don’t know about. We need to warn Ardam.”

Jonteel leaned back in his chair, thought about it. “You’re right, but let’s make it narrow and just ask for a blip to tell us they heard. No point in letting whoever it is know we’re here.”

“They probably already know,” said Cwen.

“Maybe,” responded Trent, “but I think Jonteel’s right. Thinking we’re here and knowing for sure are two different things. Of course, it could be a coincidence.”

Jonteel gave him an amused look. “You’re the gambling man among us. Would you bet on that?”

“Hell no,” responded Trent and Cwen.

Trent went on, “but if they are looking for us it’s a good idea to find out what for before they actually find us. Easier to duck if they don’t know where you are.”

“Agreed. You get ready for a tight beam call down. We’ll be in position in about 40 minutes. Cwen and I’ll see if we can spot our new friend on passive scanners.”

“Right, I’ll send a compressed burst and ask for a single beat in response. Ardam and I have done that a couple of times over the years.”

“For no good reason I expect,” said Cwen. “Jon, you start looking at the passive and I’ll see if I can plot a direction for you from what little info we did get from their burst to the beacon.”

“I don’t hold out much hope. We don’t know how far out they are,” said Jonteel.

Trent froze for a second, his hands stopping in mid motion on the console. “I just had a bad thought.”

Jonteel look in his direction. “You mean like they were already in-system, waiting for us?”

“And we just slid right by them, not even looking,” added Cwen.

Trent nodded. “Makes sense, we had no reason to look. But let’s think about it. First there’s the beacon, on a world that supposedly no one but a remote drone has every seen. Then all of a sudden, we have company – and by that – I mean company, from a company. I think that Neema and her group are being setup for something.”

“You don’t think she’s involved?” asked Jonteel.

“Wouldn’t make sense. If she were involved the only people being setup would be one of us. I know that we all have some things in our past that aren’t exactly story book material, but I don’t think anyone would go to this much trouble and expense to get even. And believe me, this operation isn’t cheap, and since that beacon’s been there awhile, this operation isn’t recent either, or at least the reason for it isn’t.

Jonteel, returning to work on his board said, “yea, that makes sense. Whatever this is, it either started a long time ago or someone is just using the circumstances to make some kind of play.”

Cwen sighed, “And we get caught in the crossfire.” It wasn’t the first time that it/they had been in this position.

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The five had slipped into their snug one man sleeping tubes soon after finishing an evening meal of concentrates. The tubes were a combination of sleeping bag and tent. Designed to keep out the weather they also provided enough space when the head liner was expanded for pre-sleep activities such as reading and eating. In a pinch activities for two could be engaged in although not without a little crimping of style.

Ardam had just slipped into sleep when the insistent beeping of his comm unit woke him. He could hear the same annoying tone coming from the other sleeping tubes. Whatever the shuttle was alerting him for was obviously addressed to everyone.

He was the first to connect and get the message. Quickly he slid out of the tube to in time to greet the others as they also emerged. The look on their faces told him that they had received the same message.

“What the hell did that mean?” asked the doctor.

Since they had all heard the same message Ardam didn’t bother to repeat it. He confined himself to practical. “It means what it said. There’s another player involved, and if Trent’s right, they’ve been here all along.”

“And what he said about it being about me?” asked Neema. “Do you think that’s true.” From the tone of her voice Ardam could tell that the thought unnerved her, at least to the extent she could be unnerved.

“Can’t say for sure but he’s right about the fact that it wouldn’t make sense that somebody went to this kind of effort for any of the rest of us. As sad as it is to say, none of us are that important. The question is – what makes you that important?”

The girl sat back against her sleeping tube, a look of uncertainty on her face. Finally, her features relaxed as she came to a decision. “There’s one small thing I may have failed to mention, not because I was trying to hide it. Because it honestly never occurred to me that it made a difference one way or another. I still don’t see why it would matter.”

Ardam spoke for all of them. “Well, how about you let us decide on that.”

“Okay, and I don’t like doing this because family business is supposed to stay just that, the business of the family. But the fact is that I’m a Cassaway by blood, no my mother’s side. I got the information about this planet from a cousin, Donathan Claypool.”

There was silence.